

You are here: [Home](#) ▶ [Research](#) ▶ [2010-2011](#) ▶ The Cinematic Self: Brazilian Slavery Films and National Identity

2016-2017
2015-2016
2014-2015
2013-2014
2012-2013
2011-2012
2010-2011
2009-2010
2008-2009
2007-2008
2006-2007

THE CINEMATIC SELF: BRAZILIAN SLAVERY FILMS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY



**Principal Investigators:** Richard Gordon, Department of Spanish and Portuguese

Can cultural artifacts such as film change their audience’s perceptions and beliefs about themselves and their national identity? Richard Gordon thinks so, and is explaining how this takes place through the study of five historical films about African slavery in Brazil.

Filmmakers in Brazil have long recognized the central role of slavery in the development of national identity. Depictions of slavery have been a staple of Brazilian historical film since the 1940s, a form of cinematic activism that has engaged politics and identity across time.

In this book project, Gordon analyzes five Brazilian films:

- *Xica da Silva* ( 1976, dir. by Carlos Diegues)
- *Quilombo* (1984, dir. by Carlos Diegues)
- *Chico Rei* (1985, dir. by Walter Lima Jr.)
- *Aleijadinho: Paixão Glória e Suplício* (2000, dir. by Geraldo Santos Pereira)
- *Cafundo* (2005, dir. by Paulo Betti and Clovis Bueno)



The project hones in on one common tool these films use to change their viewers’ beliefs: a strong central character. Strategies used to influence the audience include:

- associating the protagonist with favorable qualities of Brazilian national identity
- inducing viewers to identify with the protagonist who becomes a “cinematic self”
- linking the past portrayed in the film with the present time of the viewer
- casting the film’s cinematic self as representative of the national population.

Gordon’s study is interdisciplinary. On the one hand, he examines the sociopolitical contexts in which the films were made, and the cinematic devices used to promote their perspectives. On the other hand, he draws from social psychology for insight into how identity works, and cognitive sciences for how thoughts, emotions and beliefs can be activated by narrative.

A grant from the Mershon Center allowed Gordon to gain extended access to the archives at Cinemateca Brasileira in São Paolo, where he could finish the final stages of research. His book is forthcoming with University of Texas Press.

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